Leisure as the Purpose of Work

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Abstract: The transformations that have affected the character of paid work for at least the last three decades under the impact of the “third industrial revolution,” along with the associated processes of globalization, demand that we rethink both the idea of work and the idea of leisure. It is necessary to move beyond the specific opposition between work time and time “free” of work as it was defined and established by the character of work in the twentieth century. The post-Fordist form of work allows us to glimpse a previously unsuspected degree of freedom, responsibility, and personal creativity that can be related in a positive and reciprocal manner with the notion of leisure, here understood in terms of intellectual and cultural enhancement rather than simply in terms of diversion, entertainment or mass consumption. In this sense, leisure can become one of the purposes of work and not merely a flight from the sphere of work.

1. The transformations to which paid work has been subjected over at least the last three decades, under the impact of “the third industrial revolution” and the processes of globalization, are relevant not only to the productive activities behind the provision of goods and services, but also involve, as always, the relationship between work and existence in general. And this holds, in particular, for the relationship between time required by work and the time that is free of work, for the specific connection between work and leisure. The re-evaluation of the mechanical skills and the re-description of knowledge in terms of social utility that have emerged under the conditions of modernity, in contrast to a more traditional understanding of “speculative” or theoretical knowledge, and originally set in motion by the industrial revolution of the 18th century, have brought about the end of traditional manual labor, have created the phenomenon of factory labor and the proletariat that accompanied it, and have today allowed us to lose any real understanding of the meaning of “leisure” or “idleness.” Calvinism and Puritanism have anticipated and contributed to the development of an ethics of work that serves to justify the “iron cage” of factory labor and the economic rationalization of society in which leisure or idleness is re-described, positively, as a rest or break from the necessary exertions of work, and, negatively, as laziness and as a passive abstention from work. Both of these versions of leisure or idleness effectively
sanction the loss of the classical idea of leisure or active idleness (“Satius est [...] otiosum esse, quam nihil agere” [It is better to be idle than to work at nothing]: Pliny the Younger, *The Letters*, I, 9). When certain voices were raised in defence of the idea of leisure or idleness, from the second half of the 19th century onwards, this defence was articulated in opposition to the idea of work and the ethical valorization of the latter, and thus represented a highly restricted and minority view with respect to the social processes that were already underway and to the social movers and protagonists of such processes: productivity and economic development, capital based upon science and economy based upon organized labor. If, on the classical model, leisure or idleness was the end and purpose of all other activities, it is now economic activities that represent the end and purpose of all human activities, and idleness, when not held up as the principal danger to be avoided, is reduced to the status of a mere break or interval in such activities. Today the question is whether the transformations currently affecting the realm of work can be understood and addressed without a certain rehabilitation of leisure or idleness, whether, that is, it may not be possible to re-propose and re-describe leisure as the purpose of the freedom involved in work.

2. From the perspective of work, the processes of globalization represent a very complex development. They not only involve the flexibility of work patterns, new forms of professional competence and activity, new and more sophisticated means of deploying knowledge and expertise. In relation to immigration and less qualified and developed forms of work, what we often witness is simply new versions of servile labor deprived of genuine rights and legal protection. But craft or artisanal labor, which has never entirely disappeared, appears to be enjoying a new lease of life (R. Sennett). The domain of manufacturing labor and the service industries has never renounced “Taylorist” forms of labor organization, even if these have been brought up to date and are rather differently motivated than before, as demonstrated by the recent developments associated with the industrial relaunch of Fiat di Pomigliano in Italy. The sorts of work required by a flexible and outsourcing economy seem to be characterized more by their precariousness than by any capacity for offering new freedoms, leading to the creation of a dichotomy in the work market between employment that is gauged to indefinite periods of time and that bound to definite periods of time, and without the rights and protections that were more characteristic of the last century (R. Sennett, L. Gallino, U. Beck). In turn, the constitution of a world market for goods and services, together with the scarcity of opportunities for work and the growth of unemployment, has increased the role and importance of competition and of the constant search for innovation in products and processes of production.
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in a way that paradoxically requires more time to be spent in work on the part of everyone involved. In response to all of this, we see the emergence of a culture of resistance and rejection with regard to 20th century approaches to work (D. Meda, J. Rifkin, D. De Masi), of a denunciation of the “unhappiness of work” (R. Reich), of encomia to “idleness” (T. Hodgkinson), of “slowness” (P. Sansot, C. Baker, S. Lotha and A. McGee-Cooper, S. Nadolny, C. Honoré), and even of “sloth” (W. Wasserstein). This is still far from a rehabilitation of leisure or idleness, but there is no doubt it indicates a profound crisis in the modern conception of the value and legitimacy of work, and reconnects with the praise of idleness, and with the demand to move beyond the economistic culture of work, that was already proclaimed by 19th and 20th century authors such as P. Lafargue, R. L. Stevenson, O. Wilde, B. Russell, H. Hesse, and J. M. Keynes. Above all, we are confronted here with a denunciation of the ideological character of the various ethics of work, seen as an expression of specific interests in economic growth, and with a reassertion of meaning in the world and in a dimension of human existence both of which have been neglected precisely because they transcend the realm of merely utilitarian values (G. Bataille, A. Caillé), of a sphere of (human and natural) being that is capable of presenting itself immediately and independently of its economic potential or significance.

3. When I speak of current transformations in the character of work I am referring to the crisis of the 20th century model of work, of what can be described as the Taylorist-Fordist model. Bruno Trentin is amongst those who, in recent years, have explored these transformations with particular intelligence and perspicacity, encapsulating these developments in terms of the “end of labor as abstraction.” “Abstract labor” is the term which Marx uses in *Capital* to define the industrial labor that machine technology and political economy have reduced to the mere distribution of “abstract” labor power, that is, labor devoid of craft or skill, to the mere distribution of physical exertion measurable in terms of labor time. To argue that this form of labor has come to an end is to claim that industrial labor no longer constitutes the historically and strategically dominant form of paid labor, that industrial labor, which itself put an end to the dominance of manual work, has now been subjected in turn to a historical crisis that allows us to glimpse the emergence of a new historically dominant form of work. For Trentin this coincides with the crisis of Fordism, which itself represents the completed form of industrial labor that sprang from the economic revolution of the 18th century. The new form of work that, according to Trentin, is now asserting itself in the “knowledge society” can be described under nine points: 1) with regard to the relationship between work and knowledge, which has always existed,
it transpires in our society that work can now “increasingly become a matter of knowledge, and thus a capacity for choice, and thus a matter of creativity and freedom,” that is, a personal “factor of identity”; 2) the contribution that work makes to the “wealth of nations” depends increasingly on the “extraordinary entwinement” of knowledge and work; 3) it is “less and less the case that time determines the measure of renumeration”; 4) the “end of abstract labor” and the prevalence of “concrete work,” of “thoughtful” work, mean that “the working individual becomes the point of reference for a new division of labor, a new understanding of work and a new organization of economic enterprise itself” that depend upon “who masters relevant knowledge and who does not”; 5) Taylorism is not dead, but the “competition between commercial enterprises” is played out on the terrain of the “quality and creativity of work” and not simply in terms of productivity; 6) the growing importance of the quality and autonomy of work, of the capacity to “decide” things in the context of work, “also involves executives in responsibility for the result that affects the individual worker”; 7) the “flexibility of work” is “an imperative for commercial enterprises” and this in turn reduces “the prospects of stable occupations and in any case of a relation to stable work”; 8) the dissolution of the “old social contract” that was based on “an equal exchange between payment and a specific quantity (i.e. time) of work (regarded abstractly rather than in terms of quality), and presupposed the “passive availability of the working person” and an “indefinite period of time in relation to work” (that also serves to discourage mobility and to reward loyalty); 9) the necessity of a new social arrangement that is capable of combining flexibility with the growth of professional competences, by means of training and education throughout the entire course of life and a “socialization of knowledge,” that foresees a “certainty of contract” and the construction of “new personal security based on specific competences and the greater contractual force that flows from these in order to meet the modern labor market.”

In summary, then, Trentin focuses upon a form of work in which knowledge, education, training, language and the capacity forge connections, creativity, personal initiative and responsibility, and the individual and flexible organization of work time are increasingly necessary characteristics, and ones that are tending to replace the exercise of merely bodily effort and exertion. We are talking about forms of work which permit the realization, in an unprecedented way and on a very broad level, personal capacities and degrees of freedom that were entirely unknown in the context of the factory labor of the last century.1 This is a kind of paid labor for which Trentin also foresees

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unprecedented possibilities of freedom of choice when, in speaking of the right to work, he insists upon the idea of a “right to chosen work.”

We are talking about the profound transformations in the realm of work that emerged under the impact of automation and information technology and were recognized from the 1960s onwards by writers such as McLuhan (he points out that modern automation deprives the old mechanistic concept of “work” of all meaning: “It is this electric speed-up and interdependence that has ended the assembly line in industry [...] Men are suddenly nomadic gatherers of knowledge, nomadic as never before [...] free from fragmentary specialism as never before”), or P. F. Drucker (the nature of work over “the last twenty years [...] shifted from manual to knowledge work [...] We also do not know how to satisfy the knowledge worker and to enable him to gain the achievement he needs. Nor do we as yet fully understand the social and psychological needs of the knowledge worker”). In the 1980s, when the processes of globalization coincided with various processes of innovation, writers such as H. Kern and M. Schumann, M. J. Priore and C. F. Sabel, insisted upon developments of professional retraining and requalification, not to mention the growing autonomy and realization of personal capacities released by new forms of work (Kern/Schumann: “The idea of liberated labor, something that was only conceivable before in an anti-capitalist context, is now being highlighted [...] by capital itself as a conception of efficiency, albeit in a rather reductive form”). For their part, authors such as A. Gorz, R. Sennett, or R. B. Reich have brought out not only the novelty but also the limits of such new forms of work activity. In the most comprehensive socio-economic synthesis that has yet appeared on the subject of the new “information economy,” M. Castells (1996) points out that automation “increases dramatically knowledge. I have chosen this subject because it seems to me that this extraordinary entwinement which can enable work to become increasingly a matter of knowledge, and thus a capacity for choice, and thus a matter of creativity and freedom [...] presents the greatest challenge to the world at the beginning of this century [...] In the first place, it is less and less the case that time furnishes the measure of renumeration [...] This is the end of abstract labor. In the second place, the growing importance of quality and of the autonomy of work (the capacity to select information and thus to make specific decisions) also involves executives in the responsibility for the result that affects the individual worker [...]. In the third place, the prospect of a stable occupation, or in any case of a stable work relationship, is also lessened, as equivalent to a salary and the passive availability of the person. The flexibility of work increasingly tends to dissolve this certainty. [...] One may also reflect upon the way in which we recognize that the concrete person, who becomes a responsible subject, and is therefore active rather than passive in relation to work, has a right to proper consideration, that is to information, to consultation, and control over the object of work (the product, the organization of work, the time required for training and education and the time available for private life) to which the person is called to respond, in a resulting activity that is no longer blind and irresponsible in character.”
the importance of human brain input into the work process” so that “the broader and deeper the diffusion of advanced information technology in factories and offices, the greater the need for an autonomous, educated worker able and willing to program and decide entire sequences of work” that in turn “require a greater degrees of freedom.”

4. The numerous references to the question of freedom, summed up by Trentin as the “right to chosen work,” clearly pose the question of the relationship between freedom and work. The fact that work, unlike the activities of rest or play, has certain ineliminable aspects of restriction and necessity that are extrinsic to the intrinsic rules that work must accept and respect like any activity that is directed to accomplishing a certain goal does not mean that the experience of freedom is excluded from work, and that this experience cannot in some measure be specified or extended on the basis of given social relations of production. In relation to the form of work that emerged from the industrial revolution, and in the context of the crisis that we have already described in this connection, it seems appropriate to speak of three kinds and levels of freedom: the freedom in work, the freedom from work, and the freedom of work.

Freedom in work is essentially a negative freedom, a form of “resistance” that seeks out spaces of autonomy in relation to the “demands” of work, even under the conditions of what Weber famously described as the “iron cage” of modernity. As Vittorio Foa has written: “the entire history of human work is a story of resistance to the organization of work, to political power, to the ideology of work [...] The system of factory labor and the first industrial revolution subjected workers to terrible sufferings, but they did not, in the long run, destroy their own capacity to decide how to pursue their work and live their lives. The system of Taylorism, specifically designed to reabsorb this freedom of the worker, appeared to resolve the problem once and for all: the manual worker was divested of knowledge regarding his own work, which had been appropriated and developed by the management and returned to the worker simply as a norm to be applied to the work process. But then, once again, albeit at the cost of great conflicts and sufferings, certain spaces of freedom and self-determination were reclaimed by the workers [...] As long as there is a need to engage people to work, it will be impossible to rob them of the freedom to exercise their will.”

The question of freedom from work is an ancient one. It is connected, on the one hand, with the story of how man forfeited an original Golden Age or Earthly Paradise in which the travails of work were quite unknown. On the other, it was also connected with the mythological notion of machines or devices that could liberate man from the exertions of labor (already found in
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Homer and Aristotle). In the context of industrial modernity this idea represents more than a merely negative liberty, for it opens up the prospect of time freed from work, of time for leisure or idleness. Nonetheless, with respect to work itself it remains a negative freedom, and in this sense the time of leisure or idleness presents itself in principle as something other than and separate from the realm of work, even if it actually and moreover ends up a hostage to the logic of work time, though lived out in terms of consumption rather than production. Marx re-describes this issue at the level of productivity and industrial labor as the reduction of necessary labor time to be accomplished through a new form of political power and a new form of social organization (communism) that would guarantee universal access to cultural goods and higher levels of intellectual-cultural wealth corresponding to the “social intellect” that has allowed the development of technology, as a time other than the time of labor, since the latter does not permit any possible transition from a freedom in work to a freedom of work.

The question of the freedom of work is a typical problem of industrial society and one that presents itself today in new terms. In traditional society the problem does not arise, evidently, for servile or utterly dependent labor, while it does not constitute a problem either for the “liberal arts” or the “mechanical arts.” The craftsman, also on account of the notable flexibility and autonomy with which he organizes his work time on the basis of carefully acquired skills, chooses his own work with considerable degrees of freedom. The freedom of the hired worker before the industrial revolution is much less than this, but the flexibility with regard to time demanded by work and time concerned with the rest of life permits degrees of freedom that include interconnected forms of freedom in from and of work that were unknown to the worker employed in the modern factory (E. P. Thompson’s investigations in The Making of the English Working Class remains exemplary in this regard). In the 19th century the question of freely chosen work on the basis of personal attitudes and preferences is developed in utopian thought (Fourier speaks of “attractive forms of work” in this connection), or in authors of the later 19th century and of the 20th century who re-examine and re-evaluate the figure and the work of the craftsman (L. N. Tolstoy, T. Carlyle, J. Ruskin, W. Morris, C. W. Mills), and right down to the recent work of R. Sennett. But it is with the crisis of Fordism and the universal inapplicability of Taylorism that this question can now be posed in the radically new terms analyzed by Trentin. This is an analysis is focused on the value of the individual worker, one that raises the problem of the connection between paid or subordinate labor and the individual capacities, aspirations, and motivations that are transcend this economic relation as a historically mature question, and intersects objectively with the reflections on our “capabilities” that have been pursued by A. Sen and M. Nussbaum.
5. If we concede that a close consideration of the notion of leisure or idleness is a necessity for us, even if only because we cannot live by work alone, and it is impossible to realize the whole of our personality solely within the context of work, then the centrality of the connection between leisure and idleness and the freedom of work appears today to be replacing the centrality accorded to that between leisure or idleness and the freedom from work in the 19th century. It is not that this latter issue is disappearing, if only because leisure or idleness is not work. But I am thinking of the sense in which, in my judgement, the notion of leisure or idleness is also a criterion of civilization, in which only a form of leisure or idleness that is not merely the other of work, that is not merely divorced from the work, that is not the negation of the latter, but succeeds in maintaining certain connections of freedom with it, can allow us to advance beyond the vulgar conception of leisure or idleness as a sphere of consumption falsely contrasted with that of production, with a form of work that permits no self-realization for the human person. If it is only the freedom of work, of “chosen work,” that can fully include the person within the sphere of work, then the person in turn cannot solely and, what is more, vainly seek recreation and refreshment in the time that is kept entirely free from work. Only a form of leisure or idleness that is not simply contrasted with work would be able to constitute the end and purpose of work and as such would, by no means incidentally or fortuitously, exert an influence upon the very quality of work. From this perspective we can also re-open the discussion regarding a connection between leisure or idleness and the freedom in work by developing the connection between the freedom in work and the freedom of work. Freely “chosen work” necessarily also involves greater freedom in work, and such freedoms are the premise for the kind of leisure or idleness that encourages an enhancement of our cultural and intellectual experience and a growth of individual well-being, and a greater and more complex freedom of the person generally. And this perspective also transcends the 19th century alternative between unemployment and paid work, addressed through a politics that promised the redistribution of the demands of work and the profits that accrue from it, allowing individuals to spend more of their time free from work as a compensation for having to perform work that was not freely chosen or adopted.

It is necessary for us to think about a form of (“chosen”) work that realizes the human person, while recognizing in leisure something that no form of work can realize with regard to the person – not because work is necessarily opposed to leisure but because this side of personal realization has been opened and demanded by work. Only a form of work that includes the freedoms we have mentioned can require this type of leisure or idleness, namely a form of work whose autonomy promotes the quality of the work
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and the latter in turn requires an even more developed and qualified form of leisure or idleness. So that our life is no longer torn between the time given over to work and the time given over to what is not work, between study and work, between retirement and work, between talk about work and talk about subjects unconnected with work, even while work and leisure or idleness thereby maintain their own autonomy and the specific issues of discussion associated with them. It is only the experience of the freedom in and the freedom of work, together with a careful consideration of leisure or idleness, can teach us and enable us to pass from work to leisure or idleness and from leisure and idleness to work, including the experience of work and of the time given over to what is not work in the individual development of the person.

When Trentin, for example, insists on ongoing education as a new right associated with flexible work for the purpose of reintegrating different work experiences at the level of professional competence, this reveals knowledge as the plane where we may discover a new form of security, but also a dimension that opens the person up to a time not dedicated to work, a time that requires a higher and more developed form of leisure or idleness in which we may explore the freedom and the intellectual-cultural development that have been acquired in knowledge-based work. Or when L. Pareyson claims in his *Estetica* that the difference between the art involved in manual work (in craft labor) and art in the strict sense of the word lies in the absolute level of freedom that is attained by art, but that the art of the “chosen work” characteristic of the craftsman possesses the freedom of the “end,” does he not perhaps succeed in reconnecting, on the basis of freedom (although experienced in different degrees), the world of work with the world of the enjoyment of art that is rather too hastily ascribed to the domain of leisure or idleness?

On the other hand, without a close consideration of leisure or idleness the significance of “chosen work” also suffers, insofar as it can easily be deprived of meaning by the 19th and 20th mentality that approaches the labor market on the basis of the divorce between the time dedicated to work and the time that is not. And is this not perhaps the problem that is raised by R. B. Reich in *The Future of Success* when he writes: “A few years ago I had a job that consumed me. [...] My problem was that I loved my job and couldn’t get enough of it [...] Not surprisingly, all other parts of my life shrivelled into a dried raisin. I lost touch with my family [...] I lost contact with my old friends. I even began to lose contact with myself – every aspect of myself other than what the job required [...] I suddenly knew I had to leave my job”?

In conclusion, we may claim that the question of the freedom of work today not only enjoys a new centrality, but also that it cannot effectively be posed except on the basis of a new centrality accorded to the question of leisure or idleness. It seems indispensible to maintain a distinction between
work and leisure or idleness, without reducing the latter to a merely intellectual dimension to be realized in any activity whatsoever, including work. The pleasure and satisfaction that can be encountered in work, which is all the greater the more successfully one approaches the level of “chosen work,” is not a matter of either leisure or play. Work belongs to what Marx called the “realm of necessity,” to which neither leisure or idleness nor play can be said to belong. The time dedicated to work and the time that is not cannot be opposed to one another, any more than they can be superimposed upon one another. It remains the task of civilization to construct a time appropriate to leisure. Leisure was proposed in antiquity by the aristocracy that held sway over a servile society, but its rehabilitation and construction today appears to require indispensable contribution of the struggle conducted by subordinate forms of work. It is a battle of civilization that appears to be one of the purposes of work itself.

(Translated from Italian by Nicholas Walker)

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